

Remember When



The old courthouse at Rockford now slumbers, with only the breezes of the past bringing echoes of its former glories.

Court Day Was Exciting In Old Rockford

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The old courthouse overlooking the village of Rockford has seen livelier times. It is to be supposed that the courthouse hosted the likes of Aaron Burr, when he was visiting in the political powerhouse that was Rockford back then. And it doesn't strain the imagination too much to figure that President James K. Polk may have halted there at some time before the mantle of chief executive enveloped him, when he was visiting Cousin William Polk Dobson — he for whom the present county seat is named.

Rockford Courthouse slumbers now, wrapped in the cloak of timeliness that seems to encompass all of Surry's former county seat.

But it wasn't always like that — neither for the courthouse nor the county seat which it presided over.

It was once said, according to our favorite Surry County historian Ruth Minick, that all roads lead to Rockford.

And that may have been true, something over 200 years ago when the North Carolina General Assembly tapped a committee — isn't it amazing that bureaucracies and bureaucratic processes never change; only the players on the political stage — to select a new site for the county seat of Surry County.

And so it came to be that Rockford, on the banks of the Yadkin River, became Surry County's capital city. It thrived and for nearly 60 years — 1789 until 1850 — it was the center of the universe, at least in what was then a larger-size Surry County.

A good many roads did lead to Rockford. Granite Citians call their thoroughfare now Rockford Street, rather than Rockford Road, but Rockford Road in Dobson remains just that.

Just as the courthouse is big business to Dobson today, it was a conglomerate-size industry to Rockford back in those days following the Revolutionary War and preceding the Civil War.

Rockford was the county seat from 1790 until 1850, when Dobson received the designation. And the familiar Rockford Courthouse came into being in 1830 and was used for a little over two decades.

Surry County, at that time, also included Yadkin County. Stokes and Forsyth had decided to go their separate ways in 1789.

Rockford did have the distinction of having been laid out from scratch. Fifty-three acres, according to Ruth's records, were bought from Moses and Thomas Ayers and deeded to the five county commissioners. Five men were then named to divide the town into lots, with the proceeds from the sales going to finance public buildings.

In August 1790 court sessions were held in Rockford. A wooden courthouse had been built to be replaced in 1830 by a handsome brick structure built to last decades. The building actually did, until earlier this century.

Ruth Minick commented one time, "Court day at Rockford must have been a great day."

It really must have.

Student lawyers, we hear tell, lived in homes in Rockford, some even in law offices that also apparently doubled as dormitories, the York Tavern, the Grant-Burrus Hotel, and so forth.

Nearby was the famed Richmond M. Pearson Law School at Richmond Hill, just a stone's throw across the Yadkin in Yadkin County. Judge Pearson even presided at court sessions in Rockford, it is said.

According to Ruth, the court of quarter sessions was held every two months, while criminal cases came up before Superior Court. The punishment tools of the trade — jail, pillory, stocks, whipping post, maybe even the gallows — were all behind the Grant-Burrus Hotel.

We rather imagine that Ruth feels those stocks, or perhaps the whipping post, should be put to use for those so-called historians who persist in having President Andrew Johnson practice law at Rockford or — in a similar version — study law at Judge Pearson's law school. It may be up for

debates to whether he was even literate while in Surry, before exiting to Tennessee, fame, fortune and the presidency.

Another interesting tid-bit came from Ruth's store of knowledge. President Andrew Jackson — he of "Old Hickory" fame — studied law at Salisbury and got his license there in 1787. He went to Old Richmond and got his law license there. In 1788 he moved to Tennessee.

There is a tradition in Rockford that says Jackson did come back to Rockford for a visit, staying at the Grant-Burrus Hotel. But as for setting up a practice in Surry's capital city — no way.

Ruth says that Jackson probably did do business at the old Double Creek Settlement, about two miles east of Rockford where the temporary court was held while Rockford was being built.

Rockford got its name, by the way,

from a rocky ford. The ripple in the waters of that rocky ford provided the name for the Yadkin County newspaper based in Yadkinville, "The Yadkin Ripple."

Fame is fleeting.

Records indicate that the two-story courthouse was built to stay. The exterior walls were of brick, reportedly shipped from England and then hauled from Fayetteville to Rockford by slave labor.

Time passed and Yadkin formed its own county. A new county seat, more centrally-located, was needed, so Dobson, a new county seat for Surry and a new courthouse, came into being.

In 1925, fire raged through the not-as-proud courthouse building at Rockford. Only the shell remains — that and historical records...and memories.